

C A L I F O R N I A P A L A C E O F T H E L E G I O N O F H O N O R

# 4<sup>th</sup> annual


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CONTEMPORARY

AMERICAN  
PAINTING



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**4<sup>th</sup>**

**ANNUAL EXHIBITION  
OF CONTEMPORARY  
AMERICAN PAINTING**

**CALIFORNIA PALACE OF THE LEGION OF HONOR • SAN FRANCISCO**

**NOVEMBER 25, 1950**

**JANUARY 1, 1951**

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the Board of Trustees of the Museum for giving concrete encouragement to contemporary American painting through expressing approval of the allocation of funds for the purchase of pictures from this exhibition for the permanent collection.

To Mr. Frederick S. Bartlett, Curator of Painting at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, for the careful and conscientious manner in which he performed the always arduous and usually thankless task of selecting the paintings which are included in the juried section of the exhibition; and, further, for valuable services he rendered in serving on the committee delegated to make recommendations for purchase.

To Mr. Paul Verdier, President of the Board of Trustees, for his generous assistance as a member of the Recommendations Committee, which included the Director of the Museum and the Juror.

To Dr. Jermayne MacAgy, Assistant Director of the Museum, who has so ably discharged the heavy responsibility of selecting the works of those artists who were invited to participate in the exhibition.

To Mrs. Gay Davisson, Publications Editor, who, with Dr. MacAgy, has been responsible for the design and compilation of this catalogue.

To the lenders, without whose wholehearted cooperation the exhibition would not have been possible; and

To the members of the Museum's technical staff for the execution of the special installation of the exhibition.



**ROMANTICISM: THEME WITH VARIATIONS**  
Thomas C. Howe, Jr.



ROBERT GWATHMEY. Flower Vendors

The Museum's 4th Annual, like its predecessors, seeks to present a survey of American painting today. It is hardly necessary to point out that within the limits of approximately one hundred and fifty pictures, it is not possible to illustrate every aspect of this bewilderingly complex panorama. However, certain clearly defined and well established categories are easily recognizable, and any exhibition which attempts to provide a broad survey of the current scene will of necessity include works falling into these various classifications. To what extent any one of them may predominate in an exhibition will depend, of course, upon the degree to which a particular form of representation seems, in the considered judgment of the person or persons assembling the material for presentation, to be figuring in the contemporary picture. These categories lie within the confines of one of two sharply contrasting divisions in the field of contemporary painting. This division may be broadly defined as embracing "representative" or "objective" painting, in contradistinction to that which is "non-representational" or "subjective" in character. It is painting in the former division which concerns us here. The latter, in which the artist has abandoned the familiar Renaissance concept of space, will be treated elsewhere in the preface to this catalogue.

Even those who have only a bowing acquaintance with American painting today will find it reasonably simple to recognize in the present exhibition and to assign to their proper "pigeon-holes" examples of such categories in the first division as may be termed "romantic," "neo-romantic," "romantic-realist," "magic realist," "sur-realist," "primitive," pictures involving "social comment," and so on, to mention some of the better known classifications.

The categories shift and change with kaleidoscopic rapidity. At one time one group will occupy a position of commanding importance, only to retire to a place of relative insignificance after a period of intensive exploitation. The painters of the American Scene are a case in point. In the thirties, the names of John Stuart Curry, Thomas Benton and Grant Wood held so preeminent a place in the artistic limelight that the uninitiated



**BEN SHAHN**

**Convention**

might have been excused for asking "Is birth in the Middle West a prerequisite to fame in the world of contemporary American painting?" The contribution of these three men has been an important one, but it cannot be denied that their stars are no longer in the ascendant.

Similarly, the painters of Social Comment—artists who may be called propagandists in varying degrees—are nothing like so strongly to the fore as they were a few years ago. Such avowed exponents of this type of painting as Ben Shahn, Jack Levine and Mitchell Siporin, to mention three of the most powerful of this group (and three who are represented in the present exhibition) are not painting with the same kind of missionary zeal that marked their works a decade ago. Their compositions are characterized today by greater subtleties of concept and color than one would have believed them capable of achieving in their earlier days.

This kind of metamorphosis is to be found in the work of many an American painter. Charles Sheeler, for example, while still basically the precise, impersonal realist he has always been, is producing paintings devoid of what little pictorial content they contained some years ago. He now appears to be completely preoccupied with form. His compositions, austere and handsome, command our admiration, but they do not arouse our emotions.

Romanticism, both pure and adulterated, has long been a dominant strain in American painting. So much so, indeed, that one writer was prompted to observe that "it becomes romantic automatically whenever it ceases to be anything else." An examination of the evidence reveals the aptness of this witticism. When one stops to consider how many different guises Romanticism can assume, it is not surprising that it should be such an ever-recurring theme. That we seldom find it today in simon-pure form only enhances the fascination of the phenomenon.

## CHARLES SHEELER

## Buildings at Lebanon





EUGENE BERMAN

Apotheosis of Mexican Baroque



One of the most exotic manifestations of Romanticism is the one which is to be found in the work of a group of painters classified as Neo-Romantics. The founding fathers of Neo-Romanticism are Eugene Berman and Pavel Tchelitchev. Both are foreign-born and Paris-trained and, considering the highly intellectual character of a great deal of their work, it is rather surprising that it has exerted such a wide influence in this, the country of its



WALTER STUEMPFIG

Strathmere

authors' adoption. Perhaps the most gifted of their spiritual disciples is Wolter Stuempfig, a man of highly original personal vision, whose canvases are filled with a haunting and infinitely appealing nostalgia.

Other artists whose works are tinged with altogether different forms of Romanticism are Henry Mottson, rugged and independent artistic descendant of Albert Pinkham Ryder; the urbane and witty Yosuo Kuniyoshi; and Karl Zerbe with his rich baroque patterns which are undeniably romantic in essence. Even Karl Knaths' and Milton Avery's semi-abstract compositions savor of a poetry which is directly traceable to Romanticism. In a different way, Robert Gwathmey's stylized, decorative patterns have a romantic affinity with such forebears as Matisse and Gauguin. A small but seductive note is sounded by Carol Blanchard, whose whimsical compositions have a magical, Rackham-like charm, happily devoid of affectation.





YASUO KUNIYOSHI

Carnival

One could select many another artist from the roster of those represented in the present exhibition whose roots lead to Romanticism, but it is a subject beyond the scope of this brief essay. Suffice it, in conclusion, to quote Frederick S. Wight's comment that "the basic romantic character of American painting comes through as the one changeless aspect of American art in the last fifty years."



**ACTS AND ATTITUDES**  
**Jermayne MacAgy**



ALTHOUGH MODERN ART OWES MANY WELL KNOWN DEBTS TO THE

← BRADLEY WALKER TOMLIN. Untitled

circumstances of its birth and early years, it is far less beholden to those former attitudes than many believe. Painting today is less naively defiant, less beset with temptations to poke about in alien fields, and artists themselves are not so apt to identify their social role with Causes that dissipate their energies. During the first four decades of this century, there was a great deal of high-spirited activity in the forms of manifestos and demonstrations at the social level. Today it is evident that artists do not feel the same need to exert themselves, through individual or group action, merely to promote their position in society.

W. C. Blum has written: "In identification lies the source of dedication and enslavements." Artists in this century, busily prying themselves loose from traditional manacles, have questioned the omnipresent tendency to establish identification. Socially, this tendency has taken the form of the dictum: "In order to be an artist one has to live like one." Discussing this notion as being prevalent in Paris of the middle twenties, Nathaniel West wrote that "of course all these ideas were foisted on us by the non-artists, but we didn't realize it then. We came to the business of being an artist with the definitions of the non-artist and took libels for the truth. In order to be recognized as artists, we were everything our enemies said we were." In the past ten years artists have no longer identified themselves with ninepins of alien manufacture.

But the mechanics of identification previously operated on another level too. In form, paintings themselves incorporated a content which referred to acknowledged identities outside the picture. This type of "dedication and enslavement" also is being abandoned by painters of the present day. The turn which painting is taking as a result of this renunciation is directed along many paths. It is an international movement; but it is not an international style. "Style" is a term of the catalogue; it is predicated on identification. Within the new general attitude, therefore, it is not astonishing to find a variety of acts that cannot be defined in the customary terms of pictorial composition.

The distinction proposed here is, of course, a very broad one and is not meant to be taken too literally. Many painters make references, by title or through visual allusion, to realms in which the principle of identification may operate. However, it is suggested that the essential expression of these works transcends that simple device. One painter may allude, in his apparently non-representational work, to an atmosphere of landscape and



another to an urban environment. But neither reference limits the total expression to its local precincts. The door to less classified realms is left open. And it is this faith in experiences beyond the counters of traditional definition that distinguishes the multiform movement in painting today.



**HYMAN BLOOM**

**Buried Treasure**

In the heavily encrusted wealth of BURIED TREASURE by Hyman Bloom, a cross-section of an organic underworld is laid bare. Here is a subsurface region in which the spectator seems to be invited to bring his own associations, stimulated by the opulent purples, reds and oranges fused together

in a surging mosaic. At once more abstract and more direct, JOY by Hans Hofmann likewise appears to engage the organic world, but it is a bright world of quick rather than turgid motion. Spinning like eccentric spokes from a pivoted cam, biomorphic shapes are retarded by slashes of color which cut across the direction of their movement.



HANS HOFMANN

Joy

Some artists appear to be preoccupied with the emotional implications involved in the genesis of plant and creature life. Their paintings dramatize disquieting acts of supernature that recall myths which haunted the





**WILLIAM BAZIOTES**

**Black Silhouette**

minds of men in ancient and medieval times. In **BLACK SILHOUETTE**, William Baziotes presents a fragment of a metameris figure which rears its head like a somnambule in the half-light of prehistory. On a more contemplative side of the primeval mood Theodoros Stamos is absorbed by the



**STAMOS**

**Flower Eruption**

quiet birth and exfoliation of floral life. In FLOWER ERUPTION the soft shapes are gently suspended in an atmospheric envelope of blue. Both title and content provide clues to the air of supernaturalization that is expressed in these two pictures. In contrast, ROTATING VISION by Felix Ruvolo seems clueless. Its barbed spiral sends off flashing splinters which are arrested in a veil of gray. Here there is no mise en scene to invite the thoughts to dwell on a familiar era of the imagination. However, whereas emotions are not induced to take direction from a sense of time, in this

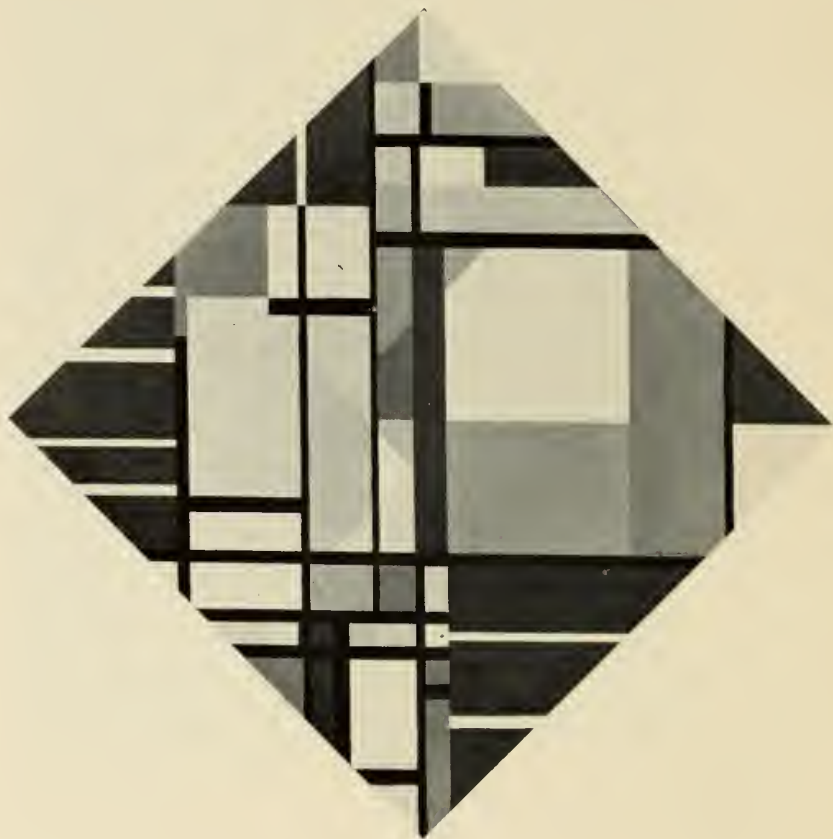


FELIX RUVOLO

Rotating Vision

Ruvolo there is a sense of place that is in some ways familiar. The drama occurs in a pictorial space that is reminiscent of a dimension which has been experienced before. This dimension, of course, is what is known in everyday speech as "real" space. It is often overlooked that the sense of reality which is identified by the public with this space is itself in part a product of a long tradition of painting. Passionate exploration of perspective representation by artists over several centuries lent great conviction to a concept of spatial reality that only recently has been challenged.

One of the most obvious movements in twentieth century painting to eschew the identification of painting with pictorial representation of deep space was the De Stijl group which was formed at Leyden in 1917. With the death of Mondrian in 1944 it was thought by some that this movement had worked itself out to the ultimate degree. That this supposition was false is evident in the existence of a fresh and lively group of painters similarly disposed



**ILYA BOLOTOWSKY. Diamond Shaped**

now. The neatly contrived NUMBER 10 by Burgoyne Diller and the dapper DIAMOND SHAPED by Ilya Bolotowsky both demonstrate a continuing ingenuity of composition that stems from certain aspects of Mondrian's later work. Because the De Stijl movement was made so conspicuous by its isolation in modern art as a whole, its followers today are especially vulnerable to the too easy charge of being imitators. But of course, imitation



**FRITZ GLARNER**

**Relational Painting, 1950**

and derivation are two different things. Current exponents develop some ideas derived from their predecessors and also institute new ones. In the latter respect Fritz Glarner, who is said to borrow from van Doesburg, presents a highly original interpretation with a sensuous conviction that far exceeds anything achieved by that forerunner.

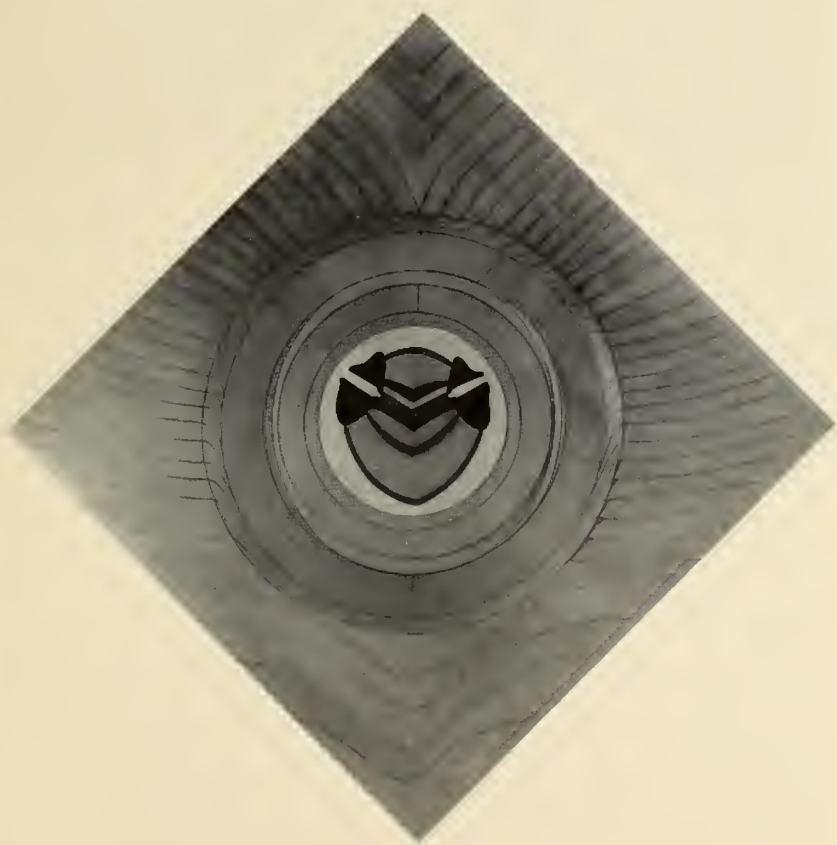


ADOLPH GOTTLIEB

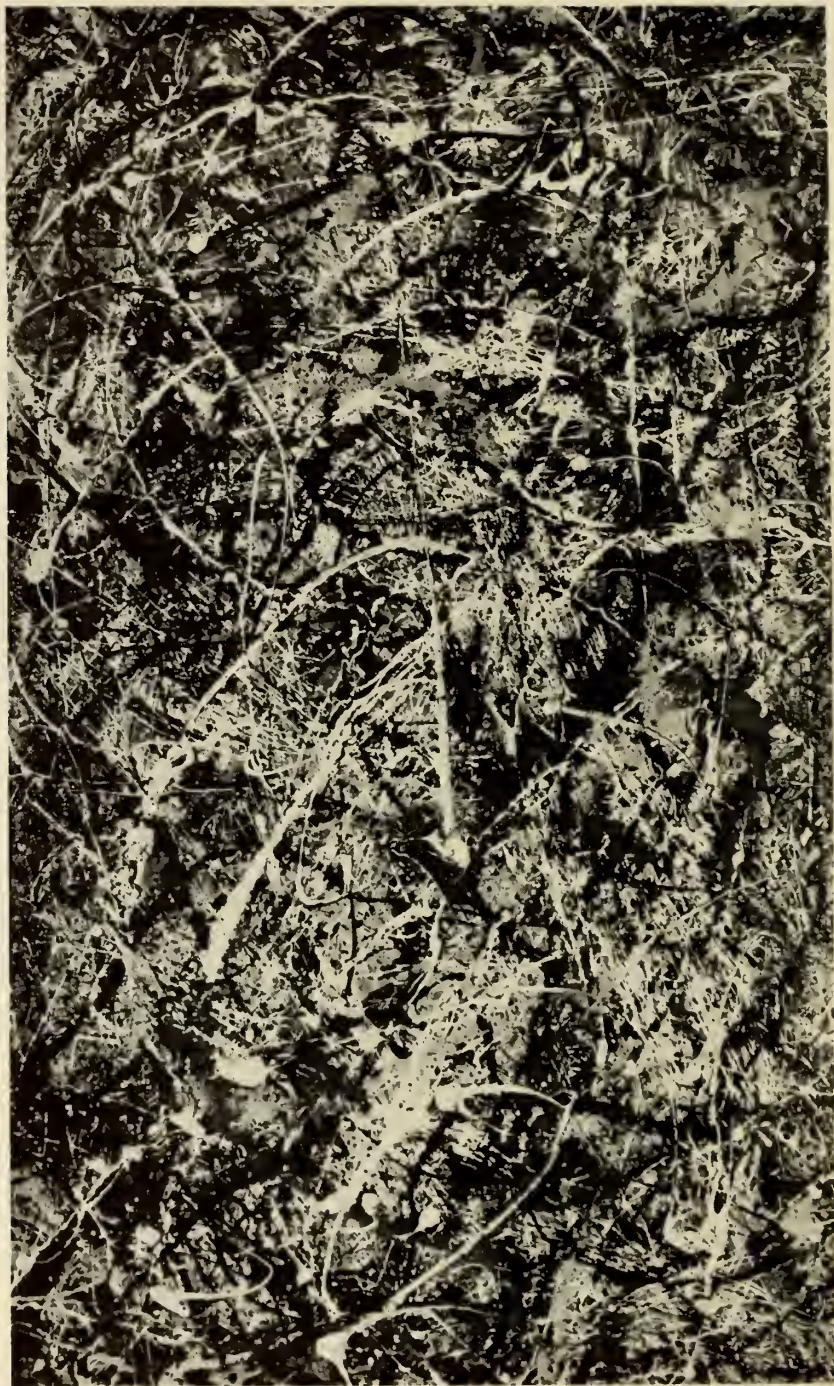
Man Looking at Woman

The course of Adolph Gottlieb's vision in recent years shows an interesting shift in the emphasis of his expression. The so-called pictographs with which he patterned his canvases a few years ago were tightly enclosed in an irregular network of compartments. In time the network gained such prominence that it appeared as a dominating grille behind which the pictographic symbols seemed to float in relative independence. Conversely now, the compartment divisions are faint, while the symbols command the space in value and scale. They act as expanding icons and suggest relationships with unrecorded images beyond the outermost limits of the frame. Max Ernst, an artist who uses symbols in quite a different spirit, performs an act of optical mischief in *THE SMILE*, which both expands and recedes in tantalizing ambivalence.





MAX ERNST. The Smile



JACKSON POLLOCK

Untitled



Working variously, Pollock, Tomlin, Reinhardt and Pousette-Dart may nevertheless be distinguished as a group from the artists whose work has so far been mentioned. Their vision is not set on a given quality of time or space; it does not explore new adjustments in composition; nor does it conjure its meaning by way of the symbol. Pollock's world may be glimpsed in this exhibition through the brilliant maze and tracery of his painting; Tomlin's through boldly disjointed rhythms of luminous lattice work; Reinhardt's through a shimmering expanse of oddly paced tensions; Pousette-Dart's through a delicately scored arabesque on an opaque plaque. Significantly, none of these paintings is titled.



CLYFFORD STILL

Untitled

Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko share an attitude that eliminates considerations of identification more thoroughly, perhaps, than in the case of any other painters. In this respect they stand for an austerity that is unique. Painters of exaltation, their work may be said to occupy a place, in our secularized culture, that once was termed hieratic. The work of both men over the past few years has moved inexorably away from the enticements of the arabesque. Shapes in Rothko's paintings have become great immobilized shadows which glow with an astringent radiance. Still's huge, abrasive canvases are vibrant with an energy that is all the more intense because of its precision and impersonality.



CHARLES HOWARD

Everyday Sovereign

Painting can be a pretty lonely job, yet the artist, who yesterday might have laid down his brush now and then to scorn the Philistine, today is apt to work away from the public arena. He may exhibit his works in public, but he himself works in private. Charles Howard, one of the most significant artists of our time, is a good example of this tendency. By no means an expatriate in the old sense of that happily obsolete word, Howard is an American who lives now in a small village outside London. There he works with unremitting concentration. Fortunately this museum has been able to present a recent work of his at each of its annual exhibitions, the current one included. The probing accuracy of his images, now as always, contribute an experience that is unusual in the show as a whole.

Those who know the previous annual exhibitions at the Legion will encounter new works by artists whose work they have seen there before, and they will find paintings by others who are represented now for the first time. Some well known artists were little known when their works were shown at the Museum five years ago. In that period there have been some remarkable changes of scene. And the changing scene is a part of the modest function of the "Annual."



**NOTES ON THE JURIED SECTION**  
**Frederick S. Bartlett**



WALTER SNELGROVE. Shipwreck

It is always a bit dangerous, and perhaps gratuitous, for a visitor to make generalizations concerning the state of art in a strange community; but it is quite obvious that painting in the Bay region, as indicated by the juried pictures, is preponderantly non-literal. Whatever the reasons for this development may be, they have been known and discussed for some time, so there is no point in delving much further into the fact.

In actual numbers, out of some 300 entries almost two-thirds of the pictures dealt with the literal object, as such, rather lightheartedly. In many cases the artist has held on to his subject simply as a hint toward objectivity, but just as often he has discarded it entirely. The total result is a juried section with a great deal of imagination, ingenuity, and, fairly often, real conviction.

The painters of this area are probably more aware of the vagaries of the modern idiom than those in most localities, and are exploring its many bypaths. The fact that some of them have been sidetracked is unfortunate, but not surprising. As would be expected, such painting is always marked by a highly personal and subjective quality. Consequently, even if desirable, it is almost impossible to discern the emergence of a "San Francisco school."



JOSEPH S. CLEARY

Prior to

However, to risk another generalization, it is quite apparent that the non-literal group of pictures, as a whole, is marked by a degree of vigor, intensity and clarity of purpose that lifts it above the average of the country. It has passed beyond the stage of experimentalizing and has become a valid expression. There are remarkably few "band wagon riders" or fashionable "abstract" painters represented.

Of some interest, certainly, is a comparison between the juried pictures and those in the invited section. As a whole, the juried canvases stand up very well with the average of the others, which in itself speaks well for the caliber of painting in this region. Individuality may not be developed quite as much as in the work of many of America's major painters, but at the same time the local work shows a high degree of personality.



The so-called conservative group of pictures, both those submitted and those invited, is much smaller, but a number of sound canvases have been selected. There is no dearth of sincere and honest realistic painting. Furthermore, it is not dull nor pedestrian in comparison with the other examples included.

It is in this category, of course, where those uncertain pictures are apt to creep in—"on the fence" canvases which are either "literal-abstract" or "abstract-realistic" and which usually end up by being nothing much one way or another. Granting our fallibility, we believe these have been largely eliminated.

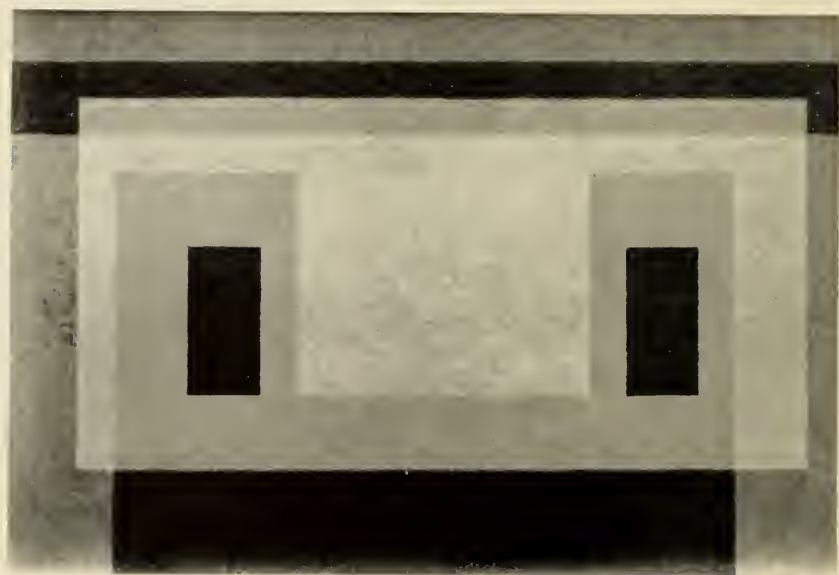
JOSEPH A. ONETO

Circa 1880





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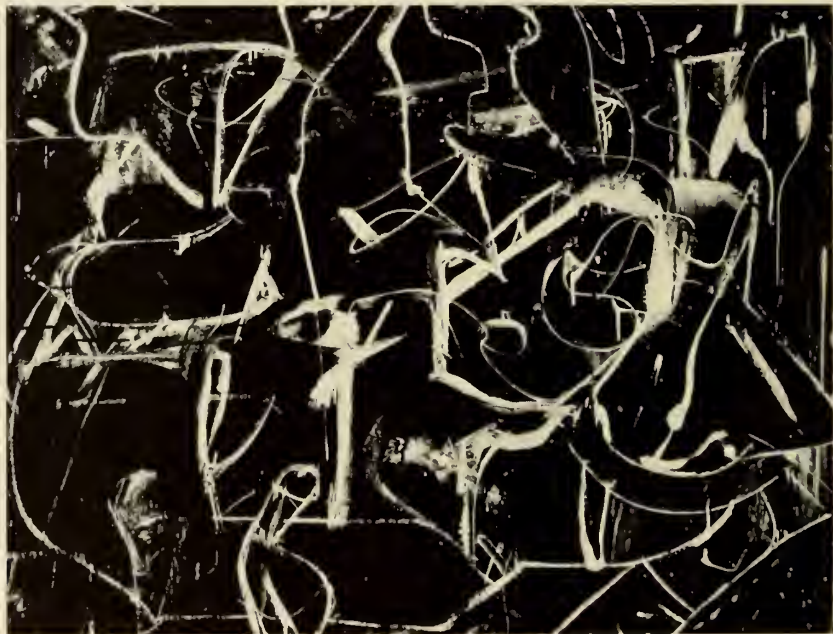


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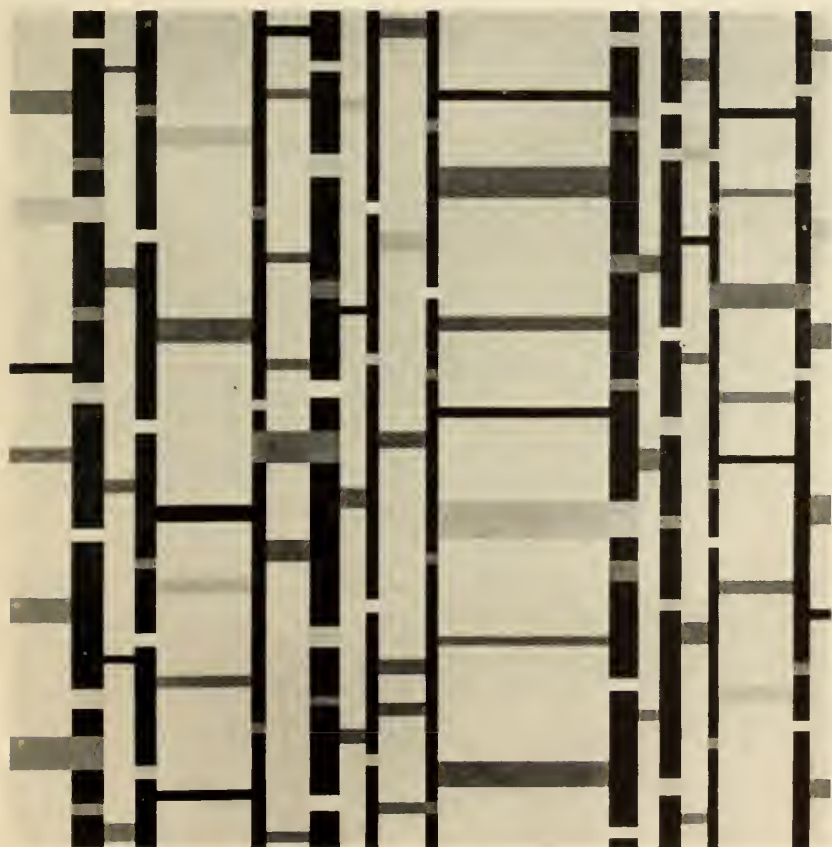
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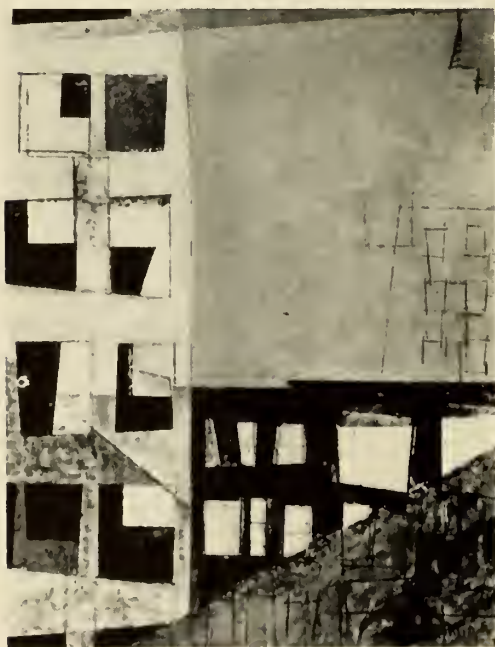
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